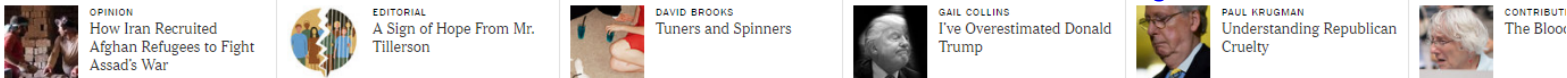


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Systemic Change Needed After Faulty Times Article

BY MARGARET SULLIVAN DECEMBER 18, 2015 1:32 PM 656

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Updated, 2:15 p.m.

Mistakes are bound to happen in the news business, but some are worse than others.

What I'll lay out here was a bad one. It involved a failure of sufficient skepticism at every level of the reporting and editing process — especially since the story in question relied on anonymous government sources, as too many Times articles do.

Here's the background: A Times article Sunday [reported](#) that the U.S. government had missed something that was right out there in the open: the jihadist social-media posts by one of the San Bernardino killers. Its initial paragraphs read as follows:

Tashfeen Malik, who with her husband carried out the massacre in San Bernardino, Calif., passed three background checks by American immigration officials as she moved to the United States from Pakistan. None uncovered what Ms. Malik had made little effort to hide — that she talked openly on social media about her views on violent jihad.

She said she supported it. And she said she wanted to be a part of it.

It was certainly damning — and it was wrong. On Wednesday, the F.B.I. director, James B. Comey, referred to such reporting as “a garble.” And, as it turns out from his statements and from [further reporting](#), Ms. Malik had not posted “openly” on social media. She had written emails; she had written private messages, not visible to the public; and she had written on a dating site.

In other words, the story's clear implication that those who vetted Ms. Malik's visa had missed the boat — a clearly visible ocean liner — was based on a false premise.

On Thursday evening, an [editors' note](#) was appended to the article; it appeared in Friday's paper. Editors' notes are sometimes used instead of corrections to provide more context and explanation. But there's no question that this also functioned as a correction.

Even before the editors' note appeared, readers were writing to me with their concerns. Nancy Cadet, who described herself as a longtime subscriber, wanted to know how this happened: “Were these reporters relying on tips from a non-credible source?” And she observed, quite correctly, that harm is done when The Times gets it wrong: “The falsehoods and their repercussions live on long after the stories have been corrected or disputed.”

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Liz Spayd is the sixth public editor appointed by The New York Times. The public editor works outside of the reporting and editing structure of the newspaper and receives and answers questions or comments from readers and the public, principally about news and other coverage in The Times. Her opinions and conclusions are her own. [Read more »](#)

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An Op-Ed piece endorsing Hillary Clinton by Michael J. Morell, a former top C.I.A. official, does not disclose that Morell works at a Washington consulting firm with connections to Clinton. [Read more...](#)

The Public Editor's Sunday Column: A 'New York'



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after the stories have been corrected or disputed.”

She’s right. Erik Wemple of The Washington Post, who wrote early and often on this all week, [noted](#) that the story “set fire to the news system. All sorts of follow-up reports surfaced. And straight into the political arena it went.” It wasn’t long, he added, before Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz was using it to bash Democrats. And there’s been a lot of commentary: [Esquire](#) saw “source pollution” as the problem; [Mother Jones](#) wrote that two of the reporters should be “considered on probation” (not dismissed, as an earlier version of this post said); and [Salon](#) called it “an epic reporting fail” with dire national consequences.

I have two major and rather simple questions: How did this happen? And how can The Times guard against its happening again? (As many readers have noted, some very critically, two of the authors of this article, Matt Apuzzo and Michael S. Schmidt, also wrote the [flawed story](#) in July that [reported](#) that Hillary Clinton would be the target of a criminal investigation by the Justice Department because of her email practices while secretary of state. Reporting by the third reporter on the current article, Julia Preston, who covers immigration, was restricted to the visa-vetting process.)

I talked on Friday to the executive editor, Dean Baquet; to one of his chief deputies, Matt Purdy; and to the Washington editor, Bill Hamilton, who edited the article. All described what happened as deeply troubling. Mr. Baquet said that some new procedures need to be put in place, especially for dealing with anonymous sources, and he said he would begin working on that immediately.

“This was a really big mistake,” Mr. Baquet said, “and more than anything since I’ve become editor it does make me think we need to do something about how we handle anonymous sources.”

He added: “This was a system failure that we have to fix.” However, Mr. Baquet said it would not be realistic or advisable to ban anonymous sources entirely from The Times.

How did this specific mistake happen?

“Our sources misunderstood how social media works and we didn’t push hard enough,” said Mr. Baquet, who read the article before publication. He said those sources apparently did not know the difference between public and private messages on social-media platforms.

I asked him why reporters or editors had not insisted on seeing or reading the social media posts in question, or even having them read aloud to them; he told me he thought that this would have been unrealistic under the circumstances, but that without that kind of direct knowledge, more caution was required.

Mr. Purdy said “we need to have a red flag” on such stories. He said he believed The Times has an “overreliance” on anonymous sources. Mr. Hamilton sees another lesson, too. “When we don’t know the details, as we didn’t here, there’s probably a reason for that,” he said. He added: “We didn’t see the dangers.”

All the editors said that slowing down, despite the highly competitive nature of a hot news story, is a necessary measure.

Mr. Baquet staunchly defended Mr. Schmidt and Mr. Apuzzo (who, he noted, won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting at The Associated Press on the New York police’s surveillance of Muslims), calling them “really fine reporters who have broken a lot of great stories” in recent months. Mr. Hamilton agreed, and noted that Mr. Apuzzo and Mr. Schmidt cover two of the most sensitive beats in Washington — national security and law enforcement, respectively, including the F.B.I.

Mr. Baquet rejected the idea that the sources had a political agenda

The Public Editor’s Sunday Column: A ‘New York’ Paper Takes a Look in the Mirror

The days of chasing fire engines may be nearing an end as The Times rethinks how it covers its own hometown.[Read more...](#)

The Clinton Story You Didn’t Read Here 409

Hillary Clinton ignited criticism with claims she made about her email use in an interview with Fox News, but don’t look for it in The Times.[Read more...](#)

A Convention Speech, Not a Bodice Ripper 176

A Times story claiming that Bill Clinton’s convention speech sexualized Hillary Clinton has readers scratching their heads.[Read more...](#)

Feuds! Favors! Name-Calling! But What About Those Russians? 153

The salacious details of cyberattacks draw the biggest headlines, but are they the biggest part of the story?[Read more...](#)

PUBLIC EDITOR TOPICS

Widely Cited

In New Policy, The Times Forbids After-the-Fact ‘Quote Approval’

The Times is one of the first major news organizations to take a firm stand against a growing and disliked practice.

For Times Environmental Reporting, Intentions May Be Good but the Signs Are Not

The Times has dismantled its environmental pod and discontinued the Green blog.

Problems With Precision and Judgment, but Not Integrity, in Tesla Test

The public editor looks into a test drive of an electric car that caused a storm.

Under Attack, Nate Silver Picks the Wrong Defense

The statistical wizard’s offer to wager on the outcome of the presidential race is a bad choice.

Questions and Answers on How The Times Handles Online Comments From Readers

How does The Times decide which comments to post on NYTimes.com? The public editor gets answers from The Times’s online commenting managers.

Was Photo of Dead Ambassador Acceptable?

Readers complained to the public editor over The Times’s decision to display a photograph of the unconscious ambassador in Libya.

Government Secrecy and Bradley Manning

The Danger of Suppressing the Leaks

Those who reveal classified material are being punished like never before.

Keeping Secrets

When the government asks newspapers to keep quiet, the bar should be very high for saying yes.

The Times Was Right to Report — at Last — on a Secret Drone Base

Editors were asked by the C.I.A. to withhold information and did so for months before publishing it online Tuesday night.

Was a Reporter’s Role in a Government Prosecution a Reason to Recuse Him?

Scott Shane, a Times national security reporter, was referred to in the government’s prosecution of a former C.I.A. official.

An Empty Seat in the Courtroom

Bradley Manning and WikiLeaks are a major story for The Times, so why was the paper so late to cover the soldier’s pretrial hearing?

The Times Should Have a Reporter at the Bradley Manning Hearing

The testimony is riveting and the surrounding issues are newsworthy.

Questions on Drones, Unanswered Still.

Just who is it that the United States is killing with strikes by unmanned aircraft in Yemen and Pakistan?

Readers Have a Stake in Obama’s Free-Speech Disconnect

The First Amendment matters for many reasons, some of them not on the world stage.

False Balance and Objectivity in Reporting



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CONTRIBUTOR
The Blood on a Tax Cut

Mr. Baquet rejected the idea that the sources had a political agenda that caused them to plant falsehoods. "There's no reason to think that's the case," he said.

The Times needs to fix its overuse of unnamed government sources. And it needs to slow down the reporting and editing process, especially in the fever-pitch atmosphere surrounding a major news event. Those are procedural changes, and they are needed. But most of all, and more fundamental, the paper needs to show far more skepticism — a kind of prosecutorial scrutiny — at every level of the process.

Two front-page, anonymously sourced stories in a few months have required editors' notes that corrected key elements — elements that were integral enough to form the basis of the headlines in both cases. That's not acceptable for Times readers or for the paper's credibility, which is its most precious asset.

If this isn't a red alert, I don't know what will be.

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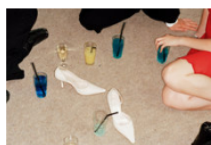
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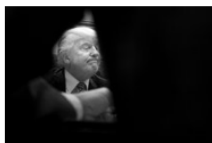
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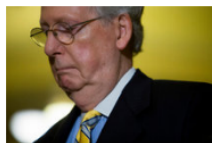
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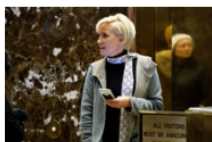
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False Balance and Objectivity in Reporting

How Social Media Affects Journalistic Objectivity

The public editor travels to Harvard's Shorenstein Center. With audio.

The Raging Debate Over Objectivity and Transparency

Is the concept outdated or even more important in the new media era?

When Reporters Get Personal

The journalistic ideal of impartiality is coming under attack. My column for this week.

In Real Time, and Beforehand, Checking Facts on the Presidential Debate

The public editor speaks with Times editors about how they plan to fact-check the first presidential debate.

When the View Is From Somewhere, Readers Ought to Know Where That Is

When opinion appears in news pages, it needs to be labeled and displayed as just that.

Facts, Truth ... and May the Best Man Win

Whatever the conclusions, whatever the effectiveness, of challenging facts, the idea that we have to debate the necessity of the media doing so strikes me as absurd.

Language and Semantics

The Times, Too, Is Reconsidering the Term 'Illegal Immigrant'

The Times is reconsidering the use of the term "illegal immigrant."

Does The Times Have Its Act Together on Vulgar Language?

An article coyly wrote around a business name that used an unprintable word according to The Times's standards.

What's an 'Islamist'? An 'Extremist'? Trying Not to Blur Language Lines

A crisis in North Africa and a reader's query bring up crucial distinctions in usage.

Adam Lanza, Asperger's and a Misleading Connection With Violence

Families are rightfully upset by some of the early reporting done on the Newtown, Conn., shootings.

An Election Day Look at How Language Changes in The Times, and in the Culture

The research and development team's Chronicle tool may distract you while you're waiting for the returns to come in.

Contradictions and Confusion on an Agreement With Iran

Unidentified sources make it difficult for readers to know what to believe regarding negotiations between the United States and Iran.

Readers Won't Benefit if Times Bans the Term 'Illegal Immigrant'

The public editor's judgment is not about immigration reform; it's about clarity and accuracy.

Is 'Illegal Immigrant' the Right Description?

An activist wants The Times to stop using the term "illegal immigrant" in its reporting.

Gender, Race and Ethnicity

Gender Questions Arise in Obituary of Rocket Scientist and Her Beef Stroganoff

After criticism on Twitter and elsewhere, the first sentence of an obituary for Yvonne Brill was changed.

An Officer's Secretly Recorded Words About 'Stop and Frisk' Cause a Firestorm

A front-page article involving the New York Police Department's internal communication could have provided greater context.

Is There Really Room to Debate Whether Women Can Lead?

A headline ignites a discussion about its "undermining" question.

Anna Quindlen and Andrew Solomon Join Discussion About Media and Transgender Children

News organizations should evaluate the motivations of parents who want to take their child's story public.

The Tale of a Transgender 6-Year-Old Child Raises Reader Concerns

Parental approval and the child's own willingness should rule the day.

T Magazine's New Editor Pleads to Make Future



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T Magazine's New Editor Pledges to Make Future Issues More Diverse

Readers complained about the absence of people of color in T: The Times Style Magazine.

A Twitter Outburst and Another Chance for Andrew Goldman

The Times Magazine interviewer offended some high-profile female writers with his questions.

Women, Women, Everywhere — but Not Much About Their Paychecks

Where, after what seemed like women's night on Tuesday at the Democratic National Convention, was the coverage of pay equity, along with gender-economic issues in general?

Culture Criticism

In the Spirit of Ada Louise Huxtable, a Times Critic Reinvents His Role

Michael Kimmelman views architecture in terms of public policy as well as aesthetics.

Reviews by Times Critics With 'All Guns Blazing'

The criticism of a new restaurant in Times Square was delicious, even if the food was not.

On the Question of a (Brilliantly) Negative Restaurant Review

The critic Pete Wells gave his first "poor" restaurant rating in The Times -- and he did it memorably.

Barred by Saint Laurent, Attacked by Gaga, a Fashion Critic Carries On

Cathy Horyn's work can't please everyone -- but this is ridiculous.

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